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Cary Nelson: ‘Ignorance’ fuels calls for Israel boycott

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Former AAUP head and others aim to sway ‘non-fanatical’ supporters of sanctions with *The Case against Academic Boycotts of Israel*



SOURCE: REUTERS

Corrective facts: the volume aims to enlighten those who know little of Israel

Support for an academic boycott of Israel is often based in ignorance, the former head of the American Association of University Professors has suggested.

Cary Nelson, emeritus professor of English and jubilee professor of liberal arts and sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and AAUP president from 2006 to 2012, has long taken issue with academic boycotts of Israel, and believes that in the past few years the “debate has intensified”.

As there are already many pro-boycott essay collections, he and his co-editor, Gabriel Noah Brahm, decided to provide a response. *The Case against Academic Boycotts of Israel* features contributions from almost 30 scholars from the US, Israel and the UK. It includes essays opposing academic boycotts on principle; accounts of how a boycott motion was passed in 2013 by the American Studies Association in what Professor Nelson calls a “very coercive” way; essays on Israeli history, culture and education, so “people don’t remain ignorant about the country they are boycotting”; and analyses of the beliefs underlying the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign and its likely impact.

Asked about his own political position, Professor Nelson stressed that “the occupation [of the Palestinian territories] is a bad deal for everybody” and that he is “interested in steps you can take to get to some kind of negotiated solution. Many would say pressure needs to be put on both sides – both of which play to their right wing and do a bad job in convincing their ordinary populations of the need for compromise”. He also believes in Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank.

More generally, Professor Nelson writes that contributors to *The Case against Academic Boycotts of Israel* are “broadly unified in support of a two-state solution, both because they want Palestinians in the West Bank to be voting citizens of their own independent country...and because they believe Israel cannot honor its democratic principles while it exercises control over a non-voting population. The book is also unified by a conviction that Palestinians will never be freed by efforts to promote one state with an Arab majority encompassing both Israel and the West Bank. BDS efforts to demonize and delegitimize Israel will only promote a hostile stalemate.”

Given the enflamed nature of the debate over Israel and the boycott, what does Professor Nelson realistically hope the book might achieve?

“I constantly come across people who don’t know very much,” he said. “I do believe that if someone who supports the boycott but is not

fanatical about it reads the book, they will find it hard to maintain their position. I won't be able to reach the people who would rather have their wisdom teeth pulled out than give up on their commitment."